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1226 N Salsipuedes Unit C 1(805)704-5994 |https://hollywoodglee.com Larry@HollywoodGlee.com



FILM REVIEW: Divines (Benyamina, 2016): France

Description



IFEST 2016 presented by Audi.

Divines is the first feature length film by self-taught director

Houda Benyamina. Benyamina, Actress Oulaya Amamra, and *Divines* were AFIFEST 2016 winners of the New Auteurs Audience Award, the Breakthrough Audience Award and a Special Jury Mention for Acting.

The film opens in surreal fashion with an out of focus frame containing a smoke and fog-like effect reminiscent of a meditation and indicative of the filmmakerâ??s use of dream logic.

Quickly, homage is made to Martin Scorceseâ??s *Taxi Driver*, with lead character, Dounia, played exquisitely by Oulaya Amamra, standing in front of a mirror pretending to fire a pistol while asking, â??You looking at me?â?• Later in the film another homage to Scorcese is made from his early work, *Mean Streets,* with Dounia on her knees in the middle of the street pleading with God.



And, without too much adieu, Benyamina quickly takes us into the inner world of her lead character, Dounia. In a sacred space Dounia sneaks voyeuristically in a low-key lit, high-angle omniscient shot looking down on a theater stage during an audition. She likes what she sees in the form of Djigui, a dancer with moves and passion, played by Kevin Mishel.

A transition is made to a rambunctious classroom. Soon, Dounia is arguing with hyper intensity as Dounia questions her teacherâ??s values and choice of vocation. The moment culminates with Dounia quitting school vowing to â??show them.â?• Her vocation is to make money.

Another transition is made to a slow motion sequence in a darkly lit dance club playing diagetic music from a singing disc jockey. Here we see Douniaâ??s troubled mother inebriated and looking for love in



oughout *Divines* for Douniaâ??s mother.

Before long, Dounia witnesses a drug stash in the back of the theater. Dounia seizes the moment and takes the stash to a local dealer with her best friend, Maimouna, an Imanâ??s daughter, played by Deborah Lukumuena. The circle is complete as the drug dealer, Rebecca, played handsomely by Jisca Kalvanda, rounds out a strong cast of mostly female characters.

Throughout *Divines*, Dounia is searching for dignity. She lives in a Roma (gypsy) camp on the outskits of Paris and is frequently called Bastard. She discovers drug dealing as a way to gain respect and power. Before long, however, Dounia finds out the price she must pay for her vocation might be too high.

In *Divines*, Benyamina illuminates an emerging Parisian subculture made up of colorful, fringe characters steeped in Islam highlighting their highly creative, unique, and authentic stories. In furthering her artistic vision to democratize cinema, Benyamina formed a mutual assistance cinematic trade association, 1000 Visages (Faces).



Possibly quite coincidentally, American mythologist, Joseph Campbellâ??s tome, â??The Hero with a Thousand Faces,â?• a seminal work on archetypal heroes and myths shared by world religions and traditions, contains the associationâ??s name in the bookâ??s title. However, I believe Benyamina has dissected the work drawing extensively from its teachings as we witness the transformation of Dounia.

For a first feature, Benyaminaâ??s *Divines* is polished. Costuming is realistic. The camera work and editing augment the filmâ??s reality well. The musical score sets the mood and aids in pacing. And the acting is quite good. Highly recommended.

Category

1. #AFIFEST
2. Cannes Film Festival
3. Feature Film
4. Hollywood

Tags

1. 1000 Visages
2. Art
3. Breakthrough Audience Award
4. Cinema
5. creativity
6. Divines
7. entertainment
8. Film
9. Film Festival
10. Film review
11. Filmmaking
12. Houda Benyamina
13. inspiration
14. Joseph Campbell

15. marketing
16. Media
17. melodrama
18. Music
19. Netflix
20. New Auteurs Audience Award
21. Oulaya Amamra
22. Paris
23. photography
24. Programming
25. Roma camp
26. Special Jury Mention for Acting
27. The Hero with a Thousand Faces
28. Women
29. writing

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hollywoodglee